

# Putting the frames in perspective

*A critique of the ARC Natural Masterpiece Project  
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When European settlers arrived in New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century they carried among their mental baggage the notion of the frame, the taken-for-granted picturesque convention for composing and viewing landscape. This legacy of eighteenth-century England persists today, and the picturesque remains a pervasive means of designing and assessing landscape. But while much of the contemporary expression of picturesque sensibility is so ingrained that we

hardly notice it, the Auckland Regional Council's Natural Masterpieces project writes it large in the landscape.

Huge gilt frames have appeared in Auckland's regional parks. The ARC is attempting to 'brand' its parks, and called in Saatchi and Saatchi to help them distinguish their parks from other 'brands', such as Department of Conservation parks. The frames have polarised opinion. "Some people like them, and some people hate them," says Rob Small, ARC's Director of Parks. But beyond their appeal, or lack of it, the frames are significant in the way they express a particular perspective on landscape in contemporary New Zealand.

## VISUAL PHENOMENON

The introduction of a frame into the environment immediately presents landscape as a visual phenomenon. The message the frames convey to the visitor is that the most important aspect of the park is the way it looks. This raises a number of issues related to our experience of landscape. For example, through emphasising the visual, the frames downplay or ignore the other phenomena that make up the park landscape, for example the richness of the constituent ecosystems with all their smells, tastes, textures, and sounds. And of course all ecosystems are not necessarily 'pretty as a picture'; they aren't how we think beautiful landscapes should look.

The frames mirror the importance of scenery to New Zealand culture. Since the Scenery Preservation Act first appeared in 1904, the cordoning off of blocks of landscape which conform to certain cultural ideals has been part of the statutory environment. The first head of the

Scenery Preservation Commission, Percy Smith, was known for his 'eye for the picturesque' (Park 1995: 143). The conception of landscape as a picture ('picture-sque'), or like a stage set ('scene-ry') has particular implications for our relationship with landscape. For example, the picturesque, with its attendant notion of scenery, can be seen as detached and two-dimensional, distancing the viewer from the landscape. James Corner highlights the limitations of understanding landscape as 'scenery' and highlights the experience of place as being "bound into a greater phenomenal range of significance than visuality affords." (Corner 1998:23)

With their focus on 'scenery', the frames therefore compartmentalise the landscape, rather than seeing it as an integrated whole. The frames are like a series of exclamation marks, implying that there are 'good' bits of the landscape, and the rest is not worth a second glance. This reflects the legacy of picturesque viewing stations which marked parts of the landscape which were worthy of contemplation. These sites were sometimes captioned, perhaps with a literary reference, which relied on a literate and knowledgeable visitor. The ARC's captions require little of the viewer, simply giving the name of the park, the motto "this natural masterpiece is cared for by the Auckland Regional Council", and the implied message – "isn't this pretty!"

## LOST OPPORTUNITY

However, with the power of the frame to highlight particular landscapes for the viewer, the Natural Masterpieces project is a lost opportunity in environmental education. By taking Joan Nassauer more literally than she intended, these could have been "orderly frames for messy ecosystems." (Nassauer 1995). Nassauer, a keynote speaker at the 1998 NZILA/LIANZ conference, explains that "nature that falls outside cultural expectations is unappealing." (p.163) It is problematic that biodiverse ecosystems tend to look 'messy', and Nassauer suggests that the way to improve appreciation of these landscapes is to frame the messiness within a recognised cultural language. So rather than framing the picturesque views, the ARC could have used the culturally powerful frames to redirect visitors' attention to the 'messy' ecosystems which are integral to the park landscapes. After all, the Regional Parks are not just scenic reserves, and the reasons behind their park status extend far beyond the visual. As Nassauer warns, "If we invest only the scenic with aesthetic quality, we construct a very coarse filter that leaves only rare places for our examination and fails to capture the aesthetic conventions that shape the larger landscape matrix." (p.163)

The visitors' attention could be extended beyond the visual, and the promotion of the parks could highlight some of the 'invisible' experiences they afford. The expansion of society's understanding of landscape is one of the greatest challenges facing



*Above: The frames in portable form  
– a punch-out postcard  
(photograph by David Hollander)*





landscape professionals. The definition of 'landscape' has been established as more than only visual by the Planning Tribunal in 1994: "[T]he human experience of landscape is a factor to take into account as well as the visual expression of the various processes identified."

(Brooker's 1999) The orchestration of visitors' encounter with parks appears to present a considerable opportunity to move beyond the visual, and to address all of the other issues that contribute to 'human experience'. For example, huge loudspeakers could amplify the songs of birds and insects. Or scratch-and-sniff postcards of park smells could be produced, instead of the punch-out portable frames (see photograph on the previous page).

Yet, the dominance of the visual in contemporary culture is undeniable, and this is of course why Saatchi and Saatchi have focused on this aspect of the parks. Television and computer screens are echoed in the format of the frame. Kim Hill even suggests that the frames are a "metaphor of our age – we can't do anything unless it's packaged up for us." (Hill 1999) Are we becoming unable to experience our environment if it isn't mediated by a screen? Do the frames represent a 'dumbing down' of environmental experience?

### DUMBING DOWN

The size and shape of the frames is homogenous throughout the regional parks, creating an implication of similarity rather than seeking to emphasise the distinctive qualities of the different locations. The ARC explain the process for selecting the best vistas at each park, but fail to capitalise on the rich variety of landscapes throughout the region. For example the panorama of the Ambury Park view as opposed to the intimacy of a bush view could have been emphasised through a change of frame size and shape.

The frames also put the visitors in perspective, orchestrating their involvement in the visual environment. In particular, they invite people to be photographed in the frames, as the slogan says "put yourself in the picture" (see photograph above). This relationship between the visitor and the landscape is dramatically different from earlier images of figures in the New Zealand landscape. Early picturesque images of New Zealand inevitably included human figures in the foreground, continuing a legacy back to the seventeenth century French and Italian painters such as Claude Lorraine and Nicholas Poussin. These

'spectator figures' were in the paintings as the viewer's surrogate, and looked at the landscape. Francis Pound explains that they "represent the displaced glance of the picture's real spectator; it is the spectator's painted deputy." (Pound 1982:41) The Natural Masterpiece frames do not require this surrogacy – the visitor can actually inhabit the view. The descendants of those early spectator figures who looked away from the viewer and towards the view inevitably now stare back at the camera. Such an outward gaze could be read as a declaration of belonging, in the same way that the figures in the paintings of Rita Angus and H. Linley Richardson stare defiantly towards the viewer. In these mid-twentieth century images, Priscilla Pitts explains, the figures "look back at us rather than with us; they, as much as the landscape, form the 'subject' of the paintings. It's as if they say to us: This is where I belong; this landscape which you see is my 'natural home'." (Pitts 1992:90)

### VISUAL POLLUTION

Another perspective on the frames and the visual dimension of landscape is the appearance of the frames themselves. The ARC claims the frames are 'objects of presence'. Yet, to others the frames are visual intrusions. Sandra Coney baldly states, "The frames are a form of visual pollution." (Coney 1999) She goes on to say the ARC should heed its own policy of rubbish free parks and take their frames home. Beyond the total removal of the frames, there is more which could have been done in terms of the placement and design of the frames which would enhance their appearance and relationship with the landscape. The bark mulch surrounds (see photograph to the left) are a utilitarian compromise. To be consistent with the concept and philosophy of the frames, as much as possible should have been done to make them appear to be suspended in space, rather than unsympathetically placed on a functional bark carpet.

While the concept and position of the frames connects Aotearoa/New Zealand to its European heritage of the picturesque, they also make an effort to refer to the local and the indigenous. The ARC Parks ecologists provided the designers with a list of Auckland's natural icons, many of which are represented on the frames, such as the kereru, tui and pukeko; nikau and clematis; and crab and kina (see photograph opposite). The composition is tied together with a kowhaiwhai border. Dick Frizzell suggests that it is even the size and iconic character of the frames which make them truly New Zealand. He believes the idea "taps into the kiwi vernacular of building a giant icon on the edge of town – it's a proud display in a proud tradition." (ARC) Perhaps the frames are another example of 'pidgin picturesque' – an imported convention or 'language' combined with an indigenous language to result in a creative response to place. (Bowring 1995) As the ARC publicity material explains, Saatchi & Saatchi's "initial visuals showed a European Renaissance-style frame, but



*Top: Arataki Visitor Centre environmental interactive drama: Doin' What Comes Naturally (photograph by ARC)*

*Below: Natural Masterpiece frame on a functional bark 'mat': Ambury Farm Park (photo: Jacky Bowring)*



it quickly became evident that a uniquely antipodean approach was needed. The frame just had to be a distinctly New Zealand frame."

But aside from the inclusion of kowhaiwhai panels on the frame, the project tells us little about Maori experience and values in the landscape. Francis Pound states that "the Maori did not paint landscape", and that "landscape, the pictorial attitude to land, stopping still just to look at it, is purely an imported convention." (Pound 1983:12) While Mitchell suggests that the issue might be more complex than this, he says with reference to any early image by Augustus Earle, the painter "does not – he cannot – represent the visual world of the Maori: that is beyond the frame, out here in the dark with us." (Mitchell 1994:26)

The frames are loaded with messages; some apparent and intended, others subtle and subversive. One of the most overt messages is of ownership and branding. This commodification of landscape is apparent on both the front and back of the frame. The ARC logo appears on the front of the frames, and on the reverse is the text "backed by WestpacTrust". The 'Park Christmas Escape Planner' has a spelling mistake (or perhaps it is intentional?) that reads: "Natural Masterpieces – this idea bought to you by Saatchi & Saatchi". So is it all about buying rather than bringing? The corporatisation of landscape challenges the notion of intrinsic environmental value. Coney highlights the implications of sponsoring landscape, stating that "Business sponsors want a direct financial benefit and have short-term goals focused on this year's profits, whereas parks need protecting in perpetuity." (Coney 1999)

Whether you like the frames or not, they put landscape experience into perspective. The frames celebrate and reinforce the legacy of the picturesque in determining our understanding of landscape. But they go further. Through focussing on the visual, the scenic, and differentiating some sites as 'better' than others they perpetuate a limited experience of landscape. They also reinforce a Eurocentric view of landscape in the presentation of a 'view'. The frames are important additions to landscape in the way that they have encouraged debate about landscape experience, heightening visitors' awareness of the cultural conventions. But there is more which could be done, including the exploration of how other cultures' perspectives on landscape could be articulated. As familiar and easily readable elements in the landscape the frames could have been an opportunity to extend and challenge the public's perception of 'nature', directing them towards the diversity and multi-sensate aspects of landscape.

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*Below: Frame detail with flora and fauna, and ARC logo.  
(photograph by Jacky Bowring)*

